
Film Review

Heart without Mind

A review of **Five Minutes to Midnight**. Director: Alan Hart. A documentary by World Focus, London, 1975.

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A film of this kind is a statement about the human condition. It raises a number of questions for the social scientist: what is the content of this statement? what model of the world does it imply? what conclusions is the viewer expected to draw? what solutions are implied for the problems posed and what is the implicit machinery of political action? what is the effect likely to be?

These questions are especially important when, as in this case, the film is deliberately designed to stir people to think about social issues and to react to them. Its makers start from the (correct) premise that the public gets from the media a very limited and distorted view of the world in which it lives, and the belief (also correct) that this is unfortunate, even dangerous.

The film does contain sequences demonstrating very vividly what it means to be poor. There are memorable shots of acres of urban slums and of undernourished children with an ambling gait. It brings home to the viewer that malnutrition is not only found during famines: but is chronic and widespread. The evils of unemployment are discussed at some length.

International inequality is also strikingly brought out. We are shown the well-stocked supermarkets of the rich countries, with heavy individuals pushing loaded trolleys.

But there is no explanation of why there are such contrasts. In the first place **internal** inequalities are largely neglected. This is a world divided sharply into two groups of countries, each of which is rich or poor as a whole. In all this film's considerable length, little reference is made to governments which take care that the benefits of modern civilization should be restricted to themselves and their supporters, or to the means they use to ensure this—riot police, political prisons, press censorship. Not a word about how the governments of rich countries help install and protect such regimes—about espionage, air forces or counter-insurgency training.



Photographs supplied by the courtesy of World Focus

It is true that these subjects are not discussed much in polite society. There are courses on development economics which do not mention the influence of corruption on resource allocation, let alone the function of torture or the role of the CIA. But this film says nothing about matters which would be covered in the syllabus taught by even the most cautious of academics, especially the network of world trade and investment that underpin the international economic order. There is no mention of multilateral companies, which is very odd, considering that the profits they extract help sustain tax revenues and the consumption levels of all classes in the countries where their headquarters are based. Nor does the film go into the control of transportation and marketing that keeps the bulk of the retail value of commodities in broadly the same countries, and there is only brief mention of the protection of manufacturers.

Yet the director does not let us in the richer part of the world off lightly. We in the rich countries are warned about a fate awaiting the world at "midnight". One of the film's merits is that it may stimulate people to ask themselves whether the relief of world poverty is compatible with the maintenance of current life-styles and what will happen if poverty is not relieved in countries already rich. But since no description is offered of the mechanism of the clock that is about to strike, we are left to infer that the unspecified holocaust which is so imminent will not be anybody's fault in particular. Indeed it must in large part be due to the poor themselves, for not responding to the benign initiative of their political leaders (some of whom are accorded surprisingly deferential interviews) and learning new agricultural and contraceptive techniques.

And since there is no basic explanation of the state of the world, no overall strategy is implied for dealing with it. The message to the rich countries is that their citizens are in some way guilty. But they are guilty as individuals—and to purge that guilt they should individually consume less, support aid programmes and give to charities. (Indeed in Britain the advance publicity stressed fund-raising). Such partial solutions could well be counter-productive, even if they were in fact widely adopted. A reduction in our consumption of food and beverages would make the poverty of many peasants still worse; aid is sometimes used to strengthen governments which are the chief obstacle to social development; charity can be a substitute for real change.

If one is serious about these matters, the question is one of politics, not individual action. The film

could have opened up the real issues for decision-makers in rich countries, which is not how to induce their populations to make sacrifices but how to devise policies for improving the world situation that have a solid basis of political support, which is now much more feasible than in the past. It is by no means essential for the governments of rich countries (including the British) to resist obstinately the setting up of a strong international maritime authority at the successive deadlocked conferences on the law of the sea, to take one example. The result is not merely to aggravate the world social situation: our position seems more and more inconsistent with our own long-term national interests. So is the opposition of our delegations, even under Labour governments, to international monitoring of the operations of multinational corporations, which we find increasingly hard to control ourselves. The real incomes of the majority of our population would actually rise if our quotas on imported textiles were gradually removed—and the greater grows the gap between wage levels in rich and poor countries, the more obvious this becomes.

These are points which members of the public might have been encouraged to bear in mind when they play their roles as trade unionists, members of consumer associations, shareholders or voters. By not drawing attention to them, when it speaks to rich country audiences, the film diverts attention away from the more fundamental issues that they would raise.

If this review is harsh, one reason is that the combination of evasion of issues with a moralizing tone is really rather offensive. I hesitate to use the words 'do gooders' pejoratively in a century when so many people are deliberately doing bad, but nonetheless this film shows clearly how dangerous a high moral tone can be if it takes the place of an examination of the real issues. A phrase of Stefan Zweig's makes the point succinctly: "Beware of pity!"

Paternalism is in any case out of date. A decade, even five years, ago a film of this kind would have been more defensible. Now we care too little—and know too much!—to pay heed to sermons on how to relieve poverty overseas by some form of puritanism. It is being shown at a time when the public in rich countries has lost confidence in its ability to solve its own problems, let alone those of the rest of the world. And the continued economic crisis makes it even less interested in initiatives that involve transferring resources overseas. The old Fabian exhortations no longer work—we are not afraid nowadays of even Leonard Woolf!

We are also much more aware now of the complexities of world problems— of the difficulties of their diagnosis and the danger that simplistic attempts to cure them may actually make them worse. The film could actually be seen as an anachronistic attempt to depict the world in terms that are familiar, and simple, and therefore reassuring. A sort of Pearson Report on celluloid. More cynically, it might be construed as an appeal to fellow members of the rich world to do something voluntarily before governments of the 'Third World', stimulated by OPEC, learn how to force through a redistribution of world income.

Another reason for disappointment is that a chance has been thrown away. **Five Minutes to Midnight** will be distributed widely. It was actually exhibited at the United Nations with a degree of official blessing. It was given two whole hours of BBC prime viewing time.¹ It will, no doubt, be shown in many countries. An 'educational' version is being prepared! Certainly what it purports to be, a serious but popular treatment of world poverty, bringing out the real issues, is badly needed. It would also be feasible. The opportunity has been lost to explain the needs which are arising in the world and which are difficult for people to grasp in countries such as Britain; such an explanation would have helped prepare us for the demands which will be made in the future. It is as if a film made 50

years ago on the social problems of Britain had said nothing about trade unions or the possibility of a general strike.

It is interesting to see this film in company and discuss it afterwards. Viewers' reactions provide a sort of litmus test. Those who enjoy a warm humanitarian feeling at a limited economic (or cerebral) cost approve of it and hope it will be widely shown. People will be forced to think about world poverty!

But I wonder whether the film will really arouse the political conscience of those for whom it is designed—the 'men-in-the-home' (to be distinguished from the 'men-in-the-street'). Viewers are left with no means of purging the sense of guilt which has been aroused (including perhaps subconscious remorse for not feeling more pity) or even discussing any of the dozens of arguments with which their senses have been bombarded. Mercifully, they can probably quickly turn to Cannon or Startrek.

Mr. Hart's film is typical of many socially-conscious television programmes. These can become, in the end, forces prolonging the evils they are attacking—political factors in their own right. To feel the emotion of pity, which is deliberately evoked, may for many people be a substitute for action, as if the mere fact of sitting through such a long and harassing film was meritorious. And many viewers, by being admonished at such length, and in such a manner, to eat less in order to save the world, will be converted into opponents of any change in the international economic order.

¹ There is incidentally something rather absurd in a film taking more than 100 minutes to say that there are only five minutes left.

